

Tell Us Your Story: Cultivating an Organizational Storytelling Culture



By: Teresa Bailey, Senior Technical Librarian
Jet Propulsion Lab, California Institute of Technology



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*Intl Workshop on Managing Knowledge for Space Missions,
Pasadena CA, July 17-19, 2007
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The Storytelling Culture at JPL



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Inspired by Organizational Storytelling Literature

Boyce, M. E. (1996). Organizational story and storytelling: A critical review. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 9 (5), 5.

Brown, J. S. & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities of practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2 (1), 40-57.

Davenport, T. H., & Prusak, L. (1998). *Working knowledge: How organizations manage what they know*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press.

Neuhauser, P. (1993). *Corporate legends and lore: The power of storytelling as a management tool*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Snowden, D. (1999). Story telling: An old skill in a new context. *Business Information Review*, 16 (1), 30.



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JPL History – Rockets



1936 – Suicide Squad members take a break during rocket testing in the Arroyo Seco



1958 - Explorer 1, America's first Earth satellite built and operated by JPL.



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JPL Today Space Exploration

Doing What No One Has Done Before



JPL

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Criteria for the “JPL Stories” Program

The only criterion for the storyteller is that the story they tell has to be a personal story about their JPL experience. Which story to tell is entirely the storyteller’s decision.

We encourage the storytellers to be as creative as they’d like and I tell them that stories can take place in the past, present, or future; they can be historical or make-believe (such as a dream for the future); and they can be light-hearted or serious.

Program is inclusive to all JPLer’s – admin, technical, and science – all ages, gender, and ethnicity.

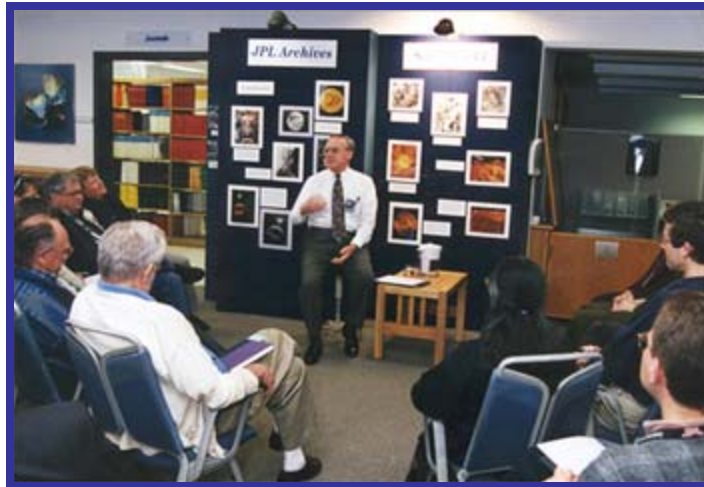


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The First Story Feb 2000 “Things to Keep” presented by Larry Dumas



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Administrative Stories



THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

Shadow Systems:
Collaboration Strikes Back!

Thursday,
July 12,
2001

Presented by DJ Byrne
Section 366

4 PM to 5 PM

JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104

DJ will be the leader for a story circle where people who have built or benefited from shadow systems are invited to share their tales. Shadow systems arise when self-motivated individuals collaborate to solve problems. Join us and tell your story about how you and your colleagues changed the Lab when no one was looking—when innovation from the trenches took our culture off the established path to create workable solutions.

An illustration of a satellite in orbit above a landscape with a person standing in the foreground, looking towards the horizon.

THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

"Automated Business Systems:
the Myth, Mystery, and Magic"

Thursday,
May 23,
2002

Presented by Marc Montgomery,
Manager, Institutional Business Systems Division and
New Business Solutions (NBS) Project

4 PM to 5 PM

JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104

Come hear some random musings from the front lines on the joys, puzzlements, and miseries of implementing enterprise-wide business systems.

All Employees are welcome.

A black and white photograph of the JPL facility, showing various buildings and structures nestled in a valley with hills in the background.

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Engineering Stories



THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

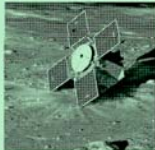
*Thursday,
September 27,
2001*

4 PM to 5 PM

*JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104*

The Story of NEAR Navigation: Extreme Partnering for JPL

*Presented by Dr. Bobby G. Williams,
NEAR Navigation Team Chief*



Near Earth Asteroid Rendezvous (NEAR) set a number of firsts in space exploration. Come hear the story of the first extreme partnership of JPL with Johns Hopkins University-Applied Physics Lab (JHU-APL).

- Hear how JPL deep-space navigation experts established an extreme partnership with the JHU-APL that enabled the NEAR mission, the first US deep-space mission to be led by a non-NASA center.
- Hear how NEAR management challenged JPL to perform a mission unlike any before it—to rendezvous and orbit a small, irregularly shaped body—the asteroid Eros.
- Hear how, even though JHU-APL is a competitor for other Discovery missions, JPL management gave NAV the green light to proceed.
- And hear how the extreme technical challenge was met and exceeded when the JPL team, completely dedicated to the task, navigated the NEAR Shoemaker spacecraft to an unprecedented safe landing on Eros.

THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

*Thursday,
November 16,
2000*

4 PM to 5 PM

*JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104*

Women Are from Mars, Too!

*Jennifer Harris Trosper
Mars Exploration Rover Project (313)*

*C*ome hear what it was like to be a part of the Pathfinder team.

All employees are welcome.



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Science Stories



THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

Thursday,
July 13,
2006

4 PM to 5 PM

JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104

Viking - a Really BIG Mars Mission

Presented by Terry Martin,
Research Scientist, Earth and Planetary Atmospheres

Few people at JPL now recall the Viking mission, which in 1976 occupied most of Building 264; in fact, before Viking, 264 was only two stories tall. Come hear some tall stories of the 900-person flight team, the two landers and two orbiters all operating at once in a very serious search for life on Mars.

Everyone is welcome.

THE JPL LIBRARY PRESENTS

JPL Stories

Thursday,
March 31,
2005

4 PM to 5 PM

JPL Library,
Customer
Service Area,
west end of
Building 111
Room 104

Waves, Wakes, and Kinks: Exploring Saturn's Magnificent Rings

**Presented by Linda Spilker, Cassini
Deputy Project Scientist**

Linda Spilker will talk about Saturn's rings and her experiences as a ring scientist on both the Voyager and Cassini missions:

- from the launches of Cassini and Voyager
- the thrill of Cassini's Saturn orbit insertion and watching the best ever ring pictures returned
- how the alignment of the planets determined the births of her daughters.

Come and hear about Cassini's efforts to solve the puzzles of Saturn's magnificent rings.

Everyone is welcome.



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Announce the Stories Everywhere Possible Virtually - JPL's Electronic News



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Daily Planet

January 29, 2007

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Help save a life

The next JPL/Red Cross blood drive will be held Feb. 6 and 7 in von Karman.

Unified modeling language

Jennifer Mindock will describe the use of unified modeling language on the Space Interferometry Mission real-time control system in a talk Monday, Feb. 12, at noon in the 167 conference room.

Redlands information session

Professional Development will host a University of Redlands School of Business open house Thursday, Feb. 1 from 9 to 11 a.m. in the 180-101 conference room.

'A Long Road to Mars'

Andy Mishkin will provide one engineer's take on the history of rovers at JPL in a talk Thursday, Feb. 8, at 4:30 p.m. in the Library's customer service area, west end of Building 111.

IN THE NEWS

Rovers ride out the odds
Denver Post 1/29/07

Climate report too rosy?
Forbes 1/29/07

MORE NEWS HEADLINES

Mitcheltree Scholarship

A memorial scholarship has been established at North Carolina State University in memory of Robert Mitcheltree, a JPL engineer who was killed in a car accident on Jan. 6, 2006.



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In Print - Posters at the Cafeteria Entrances



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JPL Library Customer Service Area – Focus on Research



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Transforming the Space



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JPL Library Customer Service Area – The Beginning of a JPL Story



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Attendance



**The Survivor Adventure: Bikini
Models, Gym Teachers, “Rocket
Scientists” Oh My!
Presented by Dave Johnson
Survivor – the Amazon**



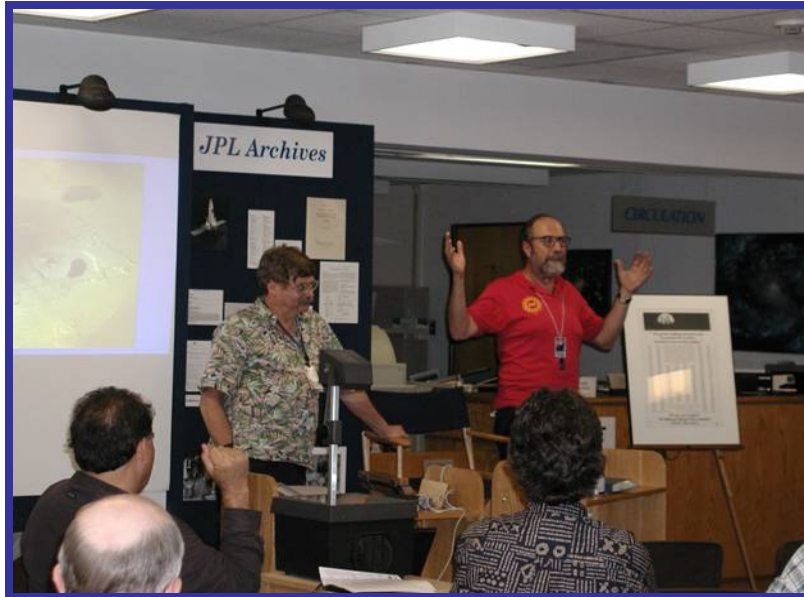
**Jet Propulsion Laboratory - the Early Years
Presented by Dr. William Pickering**



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Two or More Storytellers at One Time



"Discovery of Sulfur Dioxide on Jupiter's Satellite Io, A Personal Perspective of Two Scientists" Presented by Bob Nelson and Bill Smythe



"The True Story Behind the Mars Pathfinder Success" Presented By Rob Manning, Brian Muirhead, and Richard Cook



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Most Media Intense

“All Good Spacecraft Don't go to Heaven”

By Paul Weissman



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Props and Audience Participation



**“Ranger and Luna: Our Early Lunar Missions and Our Tracking of Theirs”
Presented by retiree Jim Burke**



**"Io, the Ultimate Destination for a Volcano Lover"
Presented by Dr. Rosaly Lopes and the Galileo
Not Ready for Real Time Players**



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Audience Response



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Feedback

Library, Archives, and Records Section
JPL Stories
Evaluation and Suggestion Form

“JPL and the Exploration of Mars”
Presented by Dr. Bruce Murray
January 31, 2002

Thank you for attending the talk today. Please fill out this survey by circling or filling in all that apply. Please give the form to a librarian or leave the form in the box labeled “Evaluation Forms” on the circulation counter.

What is your overall impression of this presentation?

- Wonderful + fascinating, insightful
- wish it was 3x longer - he's great

Where did you hear about this event? (Circle all that apply.)

☒ a. JPL Email b. This Week c. Universe d. JPL Monitor ☒ e. flyer ☒ f. poster g. Word-of-mouth

h. BEACON website i. The Daily Planet Other: _____

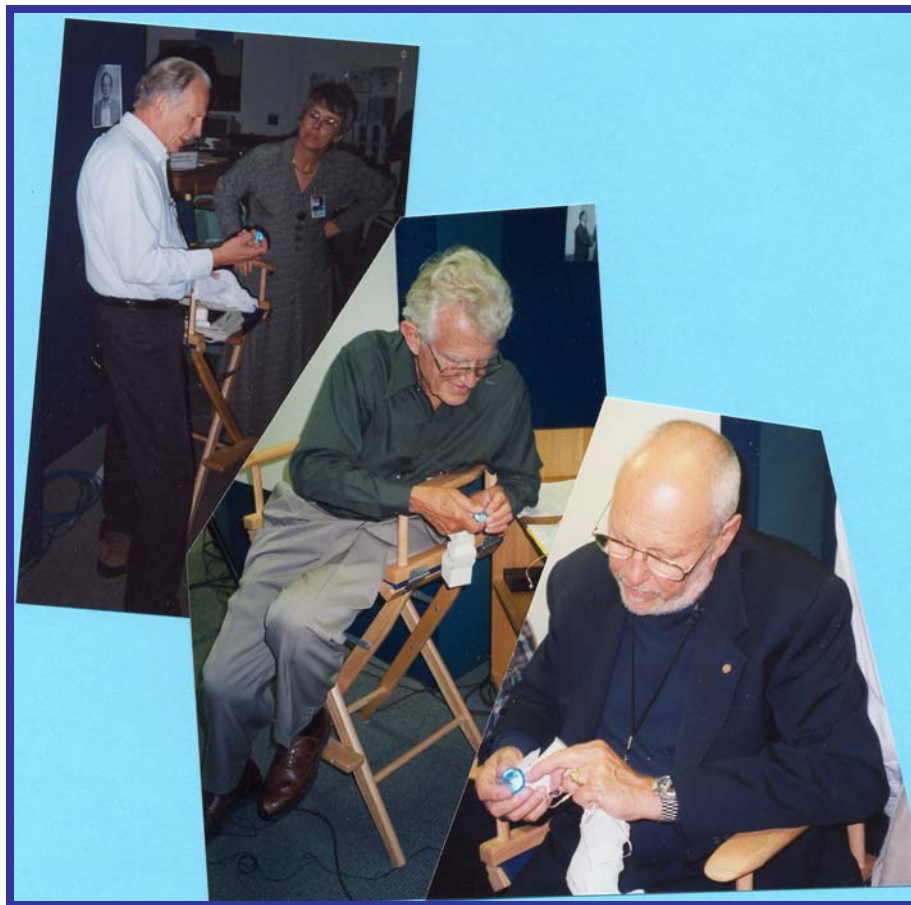
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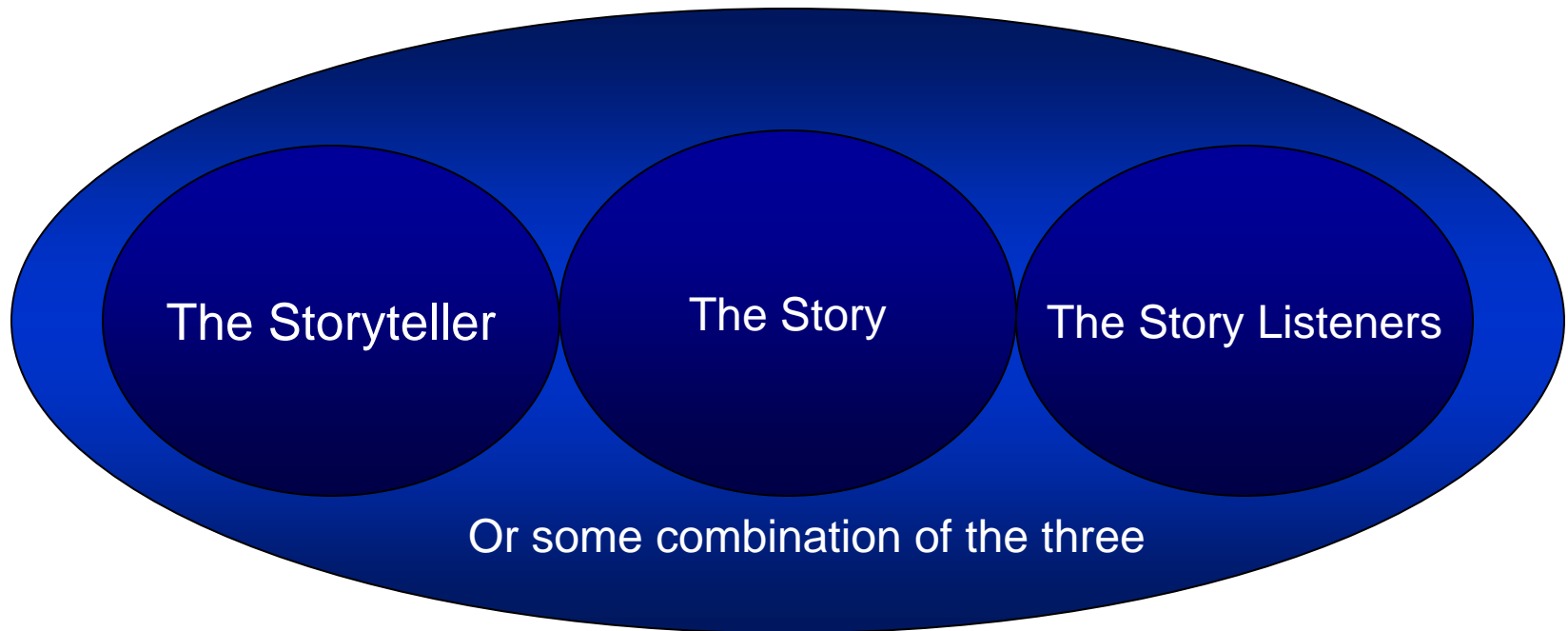
Thank you Gift for the Storyteller



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What to Research ?



The Surprise:

Expressed, deep appreciation of the storytellers



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Research Question

**What is the experience of the storyteller
in sharing a personal story
about his or her work?**



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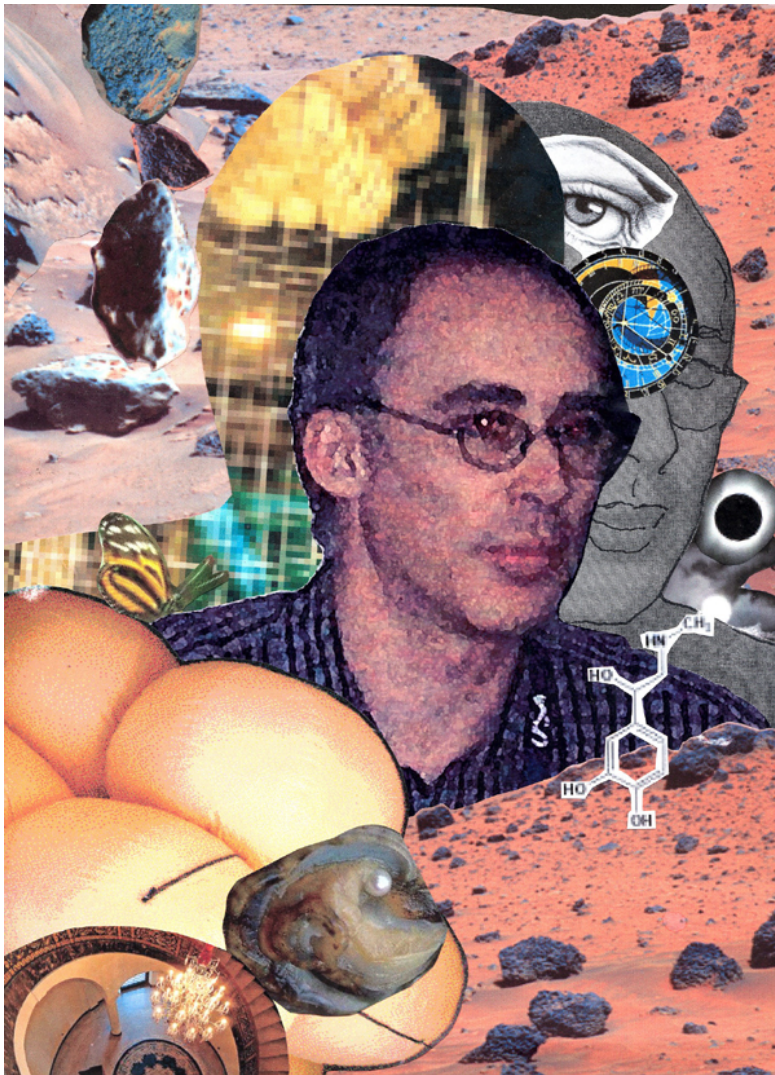
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Research Purpose

- **Illuminate workplace storyteller's experience**
- **Understand storyteller's sensemaking**
- **Explore role in personal expression**
- **Explore role in knowledge sharing**

***Moving from the personal to the organizational;
individual to the collective***



Tom, "Airbags, they're not just for cars anymore," February 2004.



This was my story, I knew it better than anybody else.

To go back and reminisce and put together a story is a luxury.

How you see other people seeing you.

It forces the adrenalin to rush and it forces you to focus...as soon as it's done you feel like a lighter person.

Storytelling is difficult to manage and it's an organic thing.

I never really thought about storytelling as a concept in and of itself and how big it is, actually it's a big deal.



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The Storyteller

- **Identity & self-concept: Internal experience**
- **Organizational identity: Social experience**
 - Legacy
 - Sharing one's identity, building relationships
 - Bonding
 - Community

Identity, self & self in relationship



Rosaly, "Io: The ultimate destination for a volcano lover," March, 2001,
and "Volcano adventures on the Earth and planets," March, 2005.



Young scientists get too lost in the nitty-gritty, they can't see the forest because they're looking at the trees ...seeing the forest is about making the story.

You actually learn the inside scoop ... that's what you learn in these JPL Stories.

There is a lot of the human side that you never see ...a lot of the personal side that gets lost.

It's the sense of a legacy that we want to leave behind, the stories tell about who you were rather than just what you did.

Maybe part of my love of travel, and love of exploration, and even love of telling stories, comes from my childhood.



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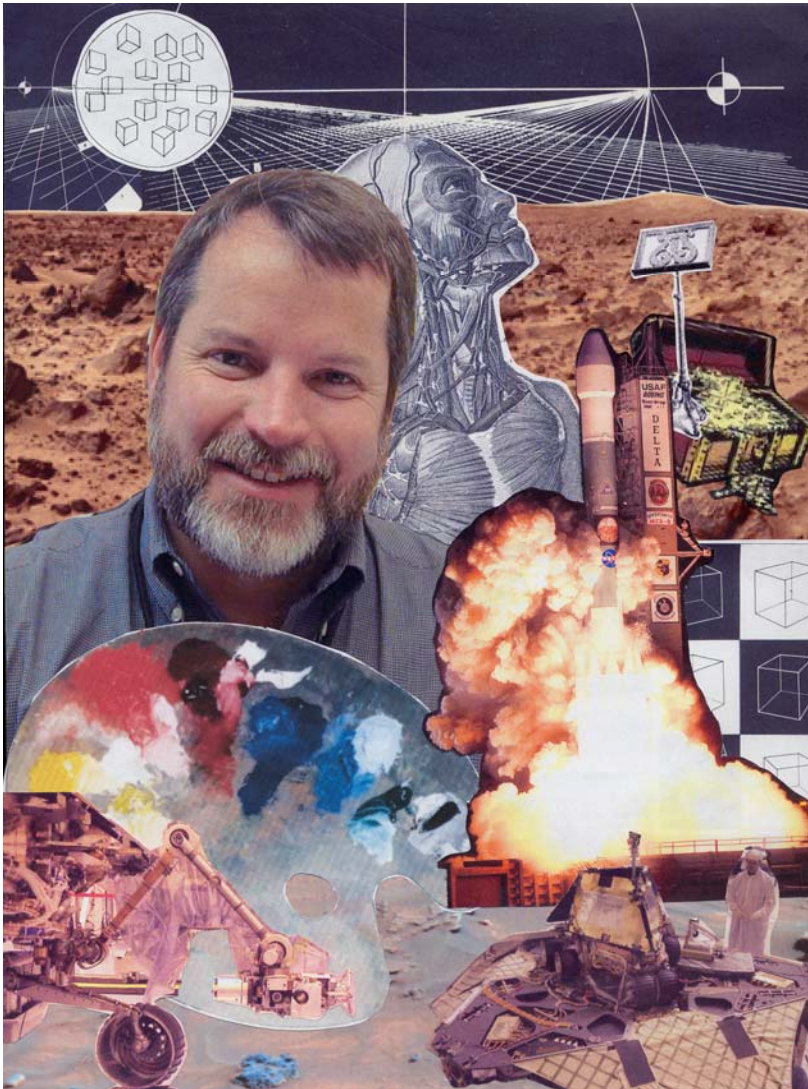
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Developing the Story



- **Personal knowledge: work-story construction**
 - Message
 - Elements
 - Relevance for audience
 - Feelings evoked
- **Collective knowledge: social construction**
 - Resonance & authenticity
 - Lessons learned

Story is a personal & social construction



Rob, "MER: Disaster Averted," November, 2004.



Storytelling was always something that I loved particularly, other people's perspective that was always the favorite.

The history falls into the present and then slides into the future and it's connected through the minds of all these people as they remember it, catching these people and having them tell me these stories was a like exploring a vast treasure of knowledge.

You're putting yourself out there, you're standing by yourself...

We're all human beings, these are human problems, ...they're art projects, you have this huge canvas ...that's how I visualize this whole problem of building these complicated systems.



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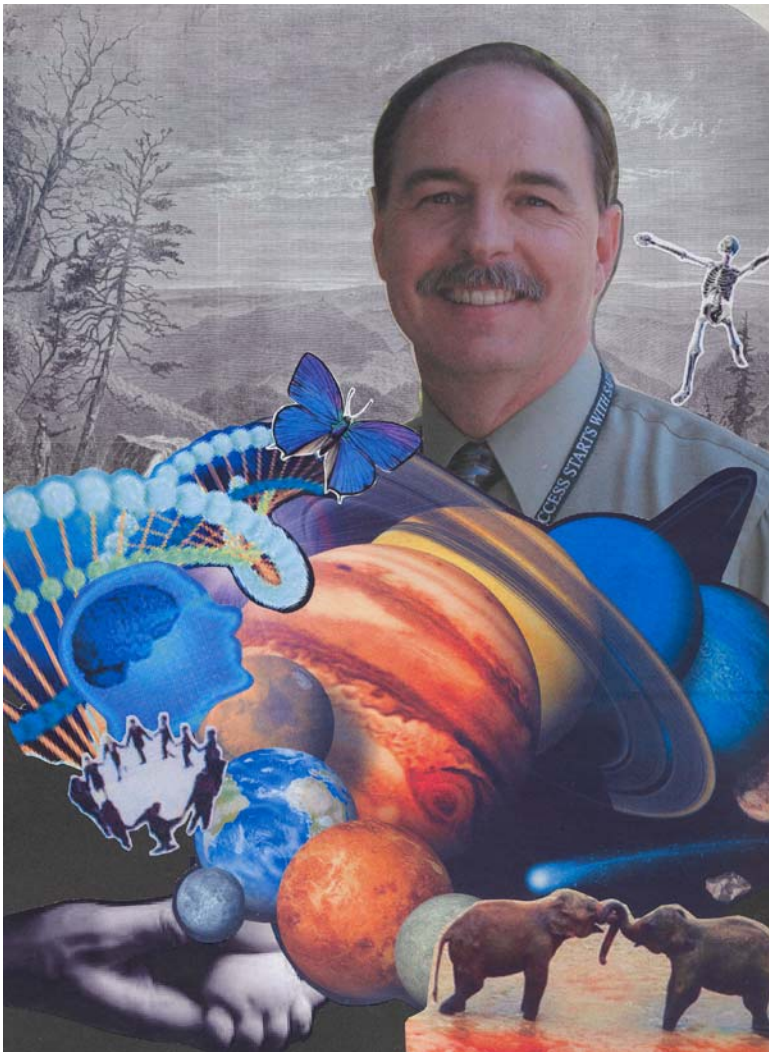
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Telling an Audience

- Minutes to curtain
- Stepping into the light
- Center stage
- Bring up the house lights
- After the curtain falls

Anticipation... performance... reviews



Marc, "Automated business systems:
The myth, mystery, and magic," May, 2002.



Stories gave me a foundation or grounding to where I came from . . . their experiences created who they are and then ultimately who I am.

An opportunity to bond in a way that you don't normally get when you just interact on the work level.

A lot of butterflies and nerves about telling the story ... you get the sense that people seemed interested and you can relax and just become a little more spontaneous.

Stepping out of the normal context ...that's fun ...that's kind of the feeling I always get about the JPL Stories.

What we do here is huge history and I'm a part of that ... And there's big pride in what JPL accomplishes.



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Organizational Storytelling as . . .

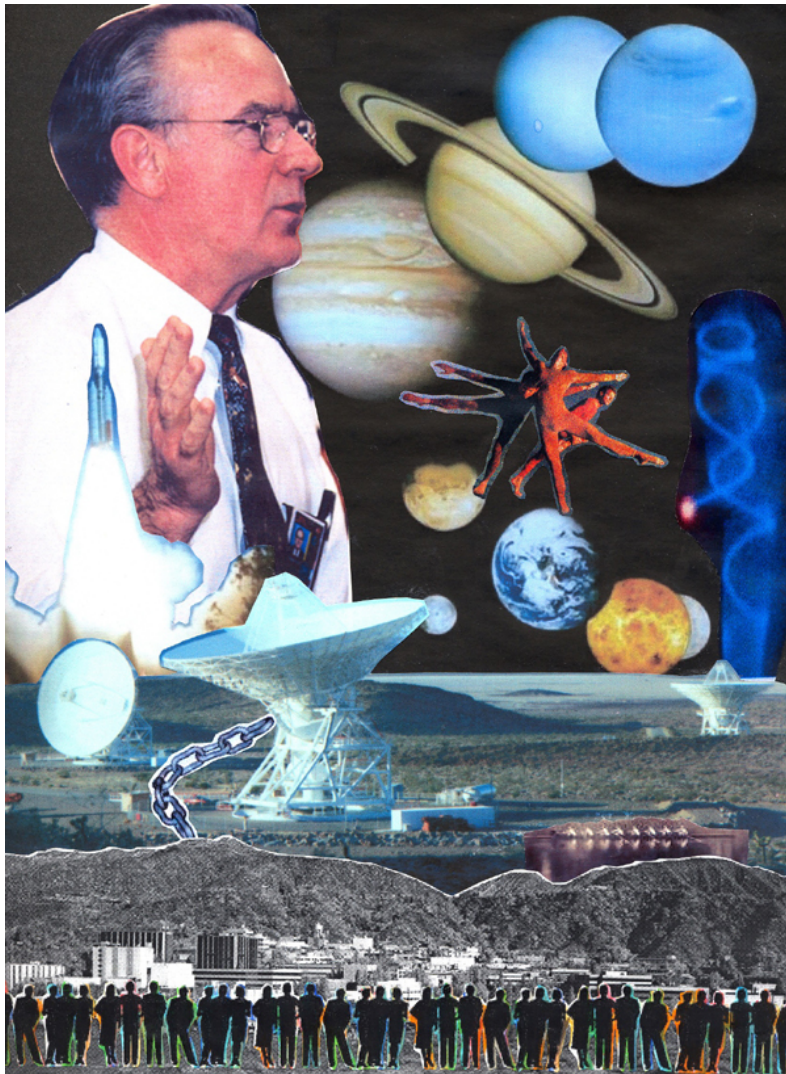
- **Cross-fertilization of ideas**
- **Mentoring**
- **Socialization of new members**
- **Embedding of culture & values**

Central to knowledge-sharing culture



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Larry, "Things to keep," February, 2000.



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How I happened to come to JPL ...was the result of an unlikely chain of events.

I had never thought in terms of storytelling but putting together my story helped me collect my thoughts and crystallize them.

Most of what you need to know as an employee is not written down somewhere.

Telling my story was an opportunity to help build an inclusive community of people who have common values, common aspirations, common goals, and where everybody was rowing in the same direction.

If JPL wants to engage in this dance ...you need to know each other very well on a personal level.

Everybody at JPL needs the sense of belonging and of contributing, not just I'm here putting in my time, but what I do makes a difference.

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The Storyteller's Experience

- Learning experience
- New understanding & meaning-making
- Significance & impact of sharing stories
- Core or master story linked to identity

Changes in consciousness evoked



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Brian, "Playing the greatest video game in the Solar system: Stories from a Mars Pathfinder Rover Driver," April 2003.



I've always been fascinated with time travel and history.

If I ever had to tell a story, I find that if I can weave magic into it, suddenly there's interest.

I've looked at lessons learned documents and learned from them, but very few of them apply to what I'm trying to solve right now.

If you want to make it lasting and memorable, then you turn it into a story.

The process of coming up with my JPL story was enlightening ...and then these interviews, I have discovered something about story telling that I didn't really know ...I've learned that unbeknownst to me, I use story telling a lot in my life.



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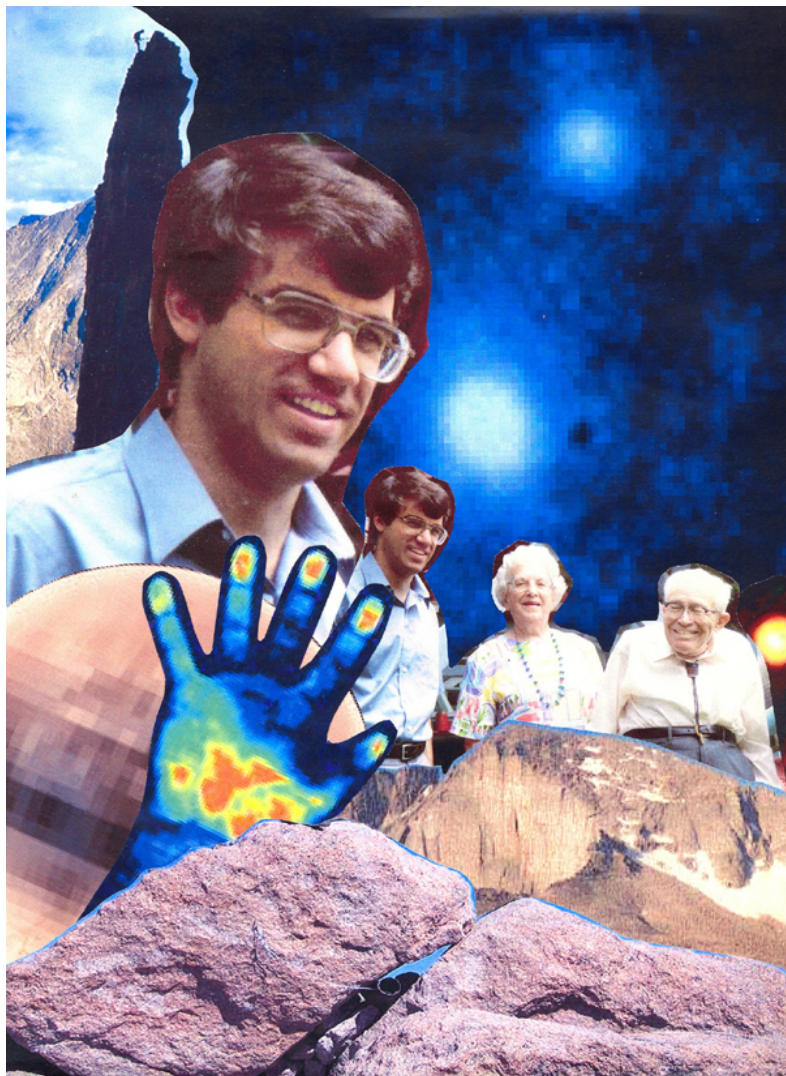
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Storyteller's Experience Crucial to:

- Individual & organizational identity
- Individual & organizational development
- Sharing lessons learned
- Personal & collective sensemaking
- Embedding organizational culture & values

Crucial that organizations understand & foster the storyteller's experience



Stories are a survival mechanism ...information that you draw on when you confront unexpected situations ...that's instantly on the spot.

I felt like I had a story to tell that was relevant to people here.

There was a question from the audience that allowed me to crystallize around it, the rest of the pieces to fill in the story ...this was the most valuable message that I think I gave.

[You] run into them a year later and they say, "Oh, I remember that great story you told up at the JPL library."

In my opinion, the richest form of the transmittal of culture occurs in, particularly firsthand, storytelling.

Robert, "The toughest part of the road to Pluto is the part from here to Washington!" February 2001.



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Build Org Awareness of Storytelling:

- Values-laden, culture-embedding tool
- Still nascent in organizational toolkit
- Little known/written on how-to
- Barriers: time, space, credibility
- Barriers: prioritization, legitimacy

Time for leadership to recognize the power of organizational storytelling



**If you'd like to talk more about organizational storytelling
Please contact me at teresa.r.bailey@jpl.nasa.gov**